The Jerking Phenomena at the Methodist Avoca Church

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In 1858, word spread quickly about a highly unusual church revival meeting held at the Avoca Church a few miles north of Fairbury. Some revival attendees experienced a jerking phenomenon where their limbs jerked uncontrollably during the session.

This story began with the birth of William James Stubbles in Maryland in 1819. At this time, the parents of William J. Stubbles are unknown to genealogical researchers and his descendants. There is no record of William and his parents in the 1830 and 1840 Census. In the 1870 Census, William reported that his father and mother were of foreign birth. In the 1880 Census, William said his father was born in Maryland, and his mother was born in Ireland.

In 1841, William J. Stubbles married Sophia Ann Hotten in Belmont, Ohio. They had six children. In the 1850 Census, William and Sophia Stubbles were living in Belmont, Ohio. They reported three children living at home at that time, and William J. Stubbles reported his occupation as a laborer. Sometime between 1850 and 1860, William J. Stubbles became a minister of the Methodist Church. They also moved from Belmont, Ohio, to Onarga, Illinois by 1860.

In 1829, the McDowell family became the second family to settle in the Fairbury area. They settled about three miles north of Fairbury on Indian Creek and established the village of Avoca. Early church services were conducted in the home of the McDowell family.

In 1857, a new church was built at Avoca. The Avoca church building was made of oak and walnut trees cut from the Vermilion River banks and milled in Avoca by James and Woodford McDowell. Mrs. Sarah McDowell, the wife of William McDowell, first settlers of Avoca Township, named the church the Pioneer Methodist Episcopal Church. It was dedicated Aug. 2, 1857, by the Rev. Zeddick Hall, then presiding elder of the Methodist Church.

In 1858, a revival meeting was held at the new Avoca Church. The guest minister who conducted the revival sessions was Rev. William J. Stubbles. These revival sessions often went on for several days.

According to the "Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois," one night, some of the revival goers got the "jerks." Some danced and threw their arms forward and back with speed. Others worked their arms steadily, like a piece of machinery. Some moved their heads back and forth quickly. Others shuffled their feet in fast precision. Some jumped up and down for an hour at a time. None showed any sign of exhaustion at these antics.

Word spread quickly of the very unusual phenomena that took place at this revival session. People then came from miles around, filling the little church to standing capacity to witness this strange phenomenon.

Some of the "jerkers" were unable to work for weeks after the revival. Dr. Darius Johnson of Pontiac, who treated some of the patients, diagnosed either chorea or St. Vitus' dance. The "jerkers" were in possession of their senses but had no control over their bodies' muscular action. It was months before most of them recovered.

In 1857, the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria to the Indiana border. The village of Fairbury was then founded in 1857. Mr. Stubbles, still stationed at Avoca, became pastor of the Fairbury Methodist Church when it was organized in mid-summer of 1858, a few months before a building was erected in the fall of '58. The original 32 by 55-foot frame structure was enlarged in 1866. Ten years later, a basement and one-story brick edifice was completed and dedicated, only to be destroyed on July 2, 1877, by a tornado. Another building was erected and dedicated on Jan. 20, 1878, to stand until torn down in 1905 and replaced.

In 1858, the Pantagraph published a story about the "jerkers" phenomena at Avoca. The article recounted that five weeks after the Avoca revival, another revival meeting was held by the Methodists at Indian Grove Township south of Fairbury. Several revival members experienced the jerks immediately after they converted to church members.

About seven weeks after the initial revival meeting was held at Avoca, another session was conducted at the Avoca church. As many as fifty revival attendees experienced the jerking phenomena.

The Pantagraph article recounted that a few previous occurrences of the jerks had been observed at church meetings around the country held by Methodists, Presbyterians, and Quakers.

In that era, and continuing into the present day, ministers often stayed a few years in one town and then moved on to another city. In the 1860 Census, the Stubbles family had moved to Onarga, Illinois. Rev. Stubbles reported his occupation was a Methodist Clergyman. The Stubbles family had six children living at home.

By the 1870 Census, the Stubbles family had moved to Colchester, in western Illinois. Rev. Stubbles reported his occupation as a shoemaker. They had three children still living at home.

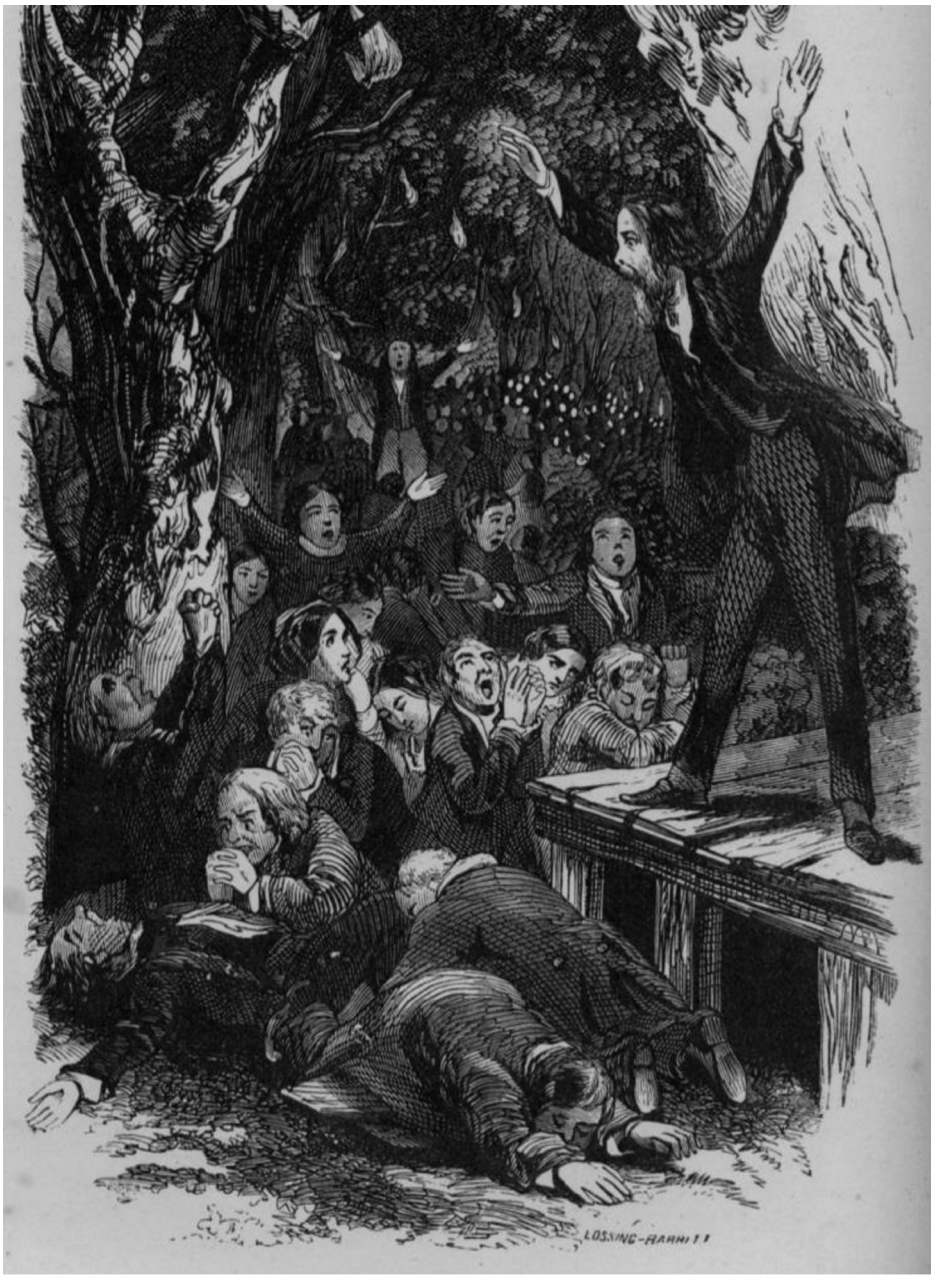
In the 1880 Census, Rev. Stubbles and Sophia were living in Henry, Illinois. He reported his occupation as a farmer. Son Charles Stubbles was the only child still living at home.

Sometime after 1880, the Stubbles family moved to the Springfield, Illinois area. Rev. Stubbles remained active in the Methodist church during the 1880s. He officiated at weddings and substituted for other ministers. Rev. Stubbles was also involved in the

Springfield area temperance movement. Ministers and medical doctors often supported the temperance movements because they had to deal first-hand with the effects of alcoholic husbands on their families.

Rev. Stubbles died in 1890 in Springfield at the age of 71. He was buried in the Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield. One of his sons, Charles Sumner Stubbles, became a Peoria lawyer and eventually became an Illinois State Representative.

After the unusual jerking phenomena at the Avoca church in 1858, Rev. Stubbles continued to be a Methodist minister for 32 years until his death in 1890. Oddly, no further mentions of this jerking phenomena were mentioned during his long career as a minister after the Avoca and Fairbury occurrences. Rev. Stubbles was one of the early pioneer Methodist clergymen in the Central Illinois area.



Samuel Goodrich's well-known illustration The Jerking Exercise associated the convulsive bodily fits with the preaching of the controversial Methodist itinerant Lorenzo Dow.